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JUAN RODRIGUEZ'S ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE: PART 2 OF 7

Sympathy for the driven fan

THE MONTREAL STAR offered a music-critic post in exchange for a Stones interview. The mission was unlikely, but not impossible

Longtime Gazette contributor Juan Rodriguez has enjoyed a vantage point on rock 'n' roll that few listeners — or even critics — have experienced. Before the music industry became a well-oiled machine, he found himself with enviable access to some of the biggest names to pass through Montreal, as well as some of the city's brightest stars. In this weekly series, he looks back at the moments that stand out in his career.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

MICHAEL DUGAS/MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

Juan Rodriguez is reunited with Keith Richards at the Rolling Stones Records offices in New York City in 1978 — nine years after the band provided the critic with his big break when he was on an extended stay in London.

Crawdaddy! began publication in 1966 (typeset on an IBM Selectric), providing a pulpit for the first wave of rock critics. Rock, wrote editor/publisher Paul Williams, had become "the arbiter of quality, the music of today. The Doors, Brian Wilson, the Stones are modern music, and contemporary 'jazz' and 'classical' composers must try to measure up."

I was already publishing my little mag Pop-See-Cul, a play on the frosty confection, starting on mimeograph and graduating to actual professional typeface, doing all design and paste-up myself (a bottom-up education in publishing). The mag became a member of the Underground Press Syndicate, centred on music and New Left politics. (As for the name, I later learned French speakers consider "cul" — short for "culture" in my title — quite risqué. I had no idea!)

Meanwhile, Crawdaddy! published an early version of Richard Meltzer's The Aesthetics of Rock, a takeoff on academic style, complete with footnotes, but also a densely sentient epistemological work. Inventor of rock criticism, Meltzer quickly became its most prolific and irreverent writer, with a prose style — made-up words, wild punctuation — you couldn't mistake for anyone else's. (He also became my hero, and friend to this day)

"A lot of what happened in the '60s felt very miraculous, like it was coming out of nowhere," he told me years later. "You didn't have 'rock-surround' yet. There was no full map, but it was certainly in massive discontinuity (with) what had been encouraged before, in terms of artistic output. It wasn't even like anyone was making art — it was just an emanation of self, like breathing, sweating."

Then along came Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band in 1967, with the acid-eyed Beatles in psychedelic Edwardian costumes on its elaborate cover collage, and advance hype — a "concept album" they spent months of multi-tracking to create — lending the album a high-art sheen before anyone removed the shrink wrap. Remember: Until then, rock 'n' roll raves were by and large the domain of teeny/bopper mags like 16 and Tiger Beat. Academics had missed the boat with Elvis; eggheads predicted Beatlemania wouldn't last six months. On Sgt. Pepper's, the Fab Four transformed British music hall into stoned art songs. (Important exception: A Day in the Life, which was probably one of the two most awesome songs to date, along side Dylan's Like a Rolling Stone.) The professors went ape, comparing them to T.S. Eliot, Schubert and so on. Record companies followed suit, and rock became not only a cash cow, but a sacred cow. Within a year, Columbia Records captured the generational mood with the slogan The Man Can't Bust Our Music.

I listened to Sgt. Pepper's incessantly for two weeks. And then I stopped. Forever. It was just bells and whistles, I decided. There was no *there* there, as Gertrude Stein once said. I won't get fooled again, as the Who had it.

Among the visitors to Expo 67 was a young New Yorker seeking respite from a controversy that would mark him forever: Richard Goldstein, who wrote the witty, sociologically inclined Pop Eye column for the Village Voice, had the nerve to pen a devastating review of Sgt. Pepper's — for the New York Times, no less! To his chagrin, he was on the receiving end of a countercultural twist on the '50s phrase "don't knock the rock": his review received more outraged letters than any other Sunday Arts article ever.

"It was the first time I'd heard a boring Beatles album," Goldstein told me in an interview for Pop-See-Cul. "And it was very tricky, gimmicky. I listened to it dozens of times, and it was a hard review to write ... but I figured a lot of people would agree with me. It never entered my mind it would cause such a huge stink. Professors wrote in saying the Beatles were Schubert and how dare I put them down? ... It hurt a lot to have people I respected either accuse me of purposely writing a bad review to elevate my own name, or completely missing hidden significances they found in the album ... I asked myself, 'How could you hate an album so many people loved?' I was convinced I was finished as a critic."

He was. Years later, he actually apologized for the piece, after leaving the music beat to cover gay affairs for the Voice.

Having dropped out of university in 1966, in my first year, by day I toiled in the mailroom at Montreal Engineering — on St. Jacques St., directly opposite the Montreal Star — and wrote at night, getting rejections, then acceptances. Hit Parader published a hysterical, clumsy screed, The Rock Revolution: Kind of a Drag. I still like the last paragraph: "Legions of psychedelic agents and con men flogging the most syrupy hype imaginable will never be able to replace the standards by which good music must be judged." The piece netted $50 U.S.

My very first interviewees, in 1968, were Bill Haley and Carl Wilson of the Beach Boys — the former still riding the wave of the first rock 'n' roll hit, Rock Around the Clock (1955), the latter troubled about his future (thanks to the draft).

The Gazette published six pieces before I summoned up the nerve to ask to be paid. "Fifteen bucks a pop, kid," said entertainment editor Jacob Siskind. "Chicken feed. Take it or leave it."

In 1968, Jimi Hendrix played Paul Sauvé Arena, his speakers perched on coasters on a low-slung stage, producing a grating sound that ricocheted off the walls perfectly. We stared agape at this small, wiry dervish with an Afro, wildly coloured ruffled shirt and tight studded pants, wielding his axe in a soul strut and psychedelic swagger, out there in his own universe, coming from outer space to our town. All sonic kinetics, without a light show. For the hundreds of fans who crowded toward the stage, Jimi used the sparsely filled arena's echoes to amazing effect.

In the spring of '69, before embarking on a six-month sojourn in swinging London, I made a proposal to the Star: If I got an interview with the Rolling Stones, would they hire me as their first full-time pop critic? "Sure, kid — go ahead, give it a try."

Upon arrival, I called the Stones' office; the secretary said the boys weren't talking now, but might be in the near future. My heart jumped: This wasn't an out-and-out no! I followed up to make sure they had my name and phone right, that I'd be here on Big Assignments, and other fibs to indicate I was, ahem, there for them.

Meanwhile, I settled into a small room on Manchester St. that anchored my dreamlike existence as "foreign (pop) correspondent" in a city with more pop happenings than any other. My pad, between Baker and Oxford Sts., was around the corner from EMI Records' headquarters — the same building where the Beatles posed for their first album cover! I felt I was at the epicentre of hip.

I wrote longhand on lined paper, every few days typing the honed product on a portable Royal — a modus operandi I hoped would approximate the 500-words-a-day routine Hemingway employed. I soon learned that when the iron strikes hot, you have to go for it. The hours flew by. I mailed articles to the Star, and received nice cheques. (The Canadian dollar went a long way back then.)

I took long walks to Soho: elbow-room-only food and flea markets on Berwick St., a cacophony of cockney accents, strip-club barkers. To the Marquee Club on Wardour St., where R&B and jazz combos made their mark (Stones, Yardbirds, Georgie Fame & the Blue Flames). A stroll down Carnaby St., bedecked with Union Jacks and the Who's mod bull's eye. Boutiques blaring Tommy ("see me, feel me, touch me"); Marrakesh Express by Crosby, Stills and Nash; Pink Floyd's spacey soundtrack to the French art film More (which hyped sex, drugs, beauty and life itself); the Stones' raunchy Honky Tonk Women; The Ballad of John and Yoko (the Beatles were slowly disintegrating in public); anything by Hendrix and, above all, Je t'aime ... moi non plus by Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin, with its churchy/orgiastic organ and heavy breathing, a No. 1 hit banned by the BBC (but not by offshore pirate stations). With the Kinks' hit Waterloo Sunset ringing in my head, I trekked across Waterloo Bridge almost nightly for a Hitchcock retrospective by the British Film Institute.

Late afternoons were spent poring over Melody Maker and New Musical Express in Hyde Park. There, I attended the free Stones concert introducing guitarist Mick Taylor, replacing Brian Jones — who, it was claimed, wanted to go in different directions (viz.: was unreliable). It turned into a memorial for Jones, who drowned in his pool a few days earlier (with a cornucopia of drugs in his system). The London papers ran Extras throughout the concert: 250,000 Happy Fans and Just a Handful of Screamers; Nice to Have Hells Angels on Our Side, above a photo of helmeted Angels assisting a drug casualty.

As part of the foreign press corps — heh heh — I was invited by the Stones' office to a press conference introducing Taylor. Street Fighting Man was the anthem of the day, a holdover from the events of 1968, when Mick joined a march on the U.S. Embassy in Grosvenor Square that turned violent. "I got a nice buzz from that," he said. "It's like our concerts in the old days. ... My whole act was showing off. And showing off is violence. It's the same sort of feeling of exhibitionism."

Talk turned to new-wave cineaste Jean-Luc Godard, whose docudrama Sympathy for the Devil (also known as One Plus One) interspersed black-power dudes delivering agitprop lectures with the Stones recording the title track. Mick declared: "I don't think Godard knows anything about black people. He just got himself a couple of two-bit hustlers." Keith sneered: "Godard sounds like a schoolboy. He's just so earnest."

The "exclusive" interview ran over three pages in the Star, and I got the pop music gig when I returned in September.

My first review for the Star, of the Doors at the Forum, was headlined Doors Bore but Boppers Love It, and ended: "The crowd loved every minute of what was passed off as music, and they enjoyed themselves. This is called Being Together and it is an easy enough commodity to produce. All the radio personalities on stage had to say was 'You're beautiful!' and the audience cheered crazily. The promoters of this kind of show certainly know 'where it's at.' They're laughing all the way to the bank."

"I don't know how old you are, but man your old. Too old to sit at your desk criticizing today's art. Let's face it your not on the right train to where everybody is going. I don't know how the Montreal Star can pay you to talk about something that your so ignorant of. You make me laugh. Take my advice get yourself a desk on the Lost and Pound section of the Star. Because man your lost and I doubt if anyone will ever find you. BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER. YOUR BLIND. BLIND WITH AGE."

This missive was the very first I opened after the review. Jim Morrison was blind drunk; the rest of the Doors just kept playing without pause, the sooner to get off the stage. I was barely 21.

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JOHN BOYDEN/MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

The DIY days: Juan Rodriguez with an issue of Pop-See-Cul in 1968.

ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE ONLINE

Each week, we'll be posting content on our website and mobile apps to accompany this series. Look for video interviews with Juan Rodriguez, playlists (available on the website only) related to each week's instalment, vintage photos, a forum for readers to submit their own rock 'n' roll stories, and more. You can also catch up on previous instalments, and read Juan's original 1969 feature on the Rolling Stones. Check back often at montrealgazette.com/rocknroll

PETER KEMP/ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

Mick Jagger at Hyde Park in 1969: a big day for the Stones, and for the critic.

Coming up in Juan Rodriguez's Rock 'n' Roll Life

Look for these instalments in the Culture section:

Feb. 2: In a blur of assignments, Janis Joplin and James Brown stood out.

Feb. 9: On the receiving end of Leonard Cohen's love and hate; deflating Bruce Springsteen's hype; an education in authenticity at the Esquire Show Bar.

Feb. 16: A close encounter with Pink Floyd's fans; a prime seat at The Last Waltz; Paul Anka does it his way.

Feb. 23: At home chez nous; Neil Young soundtracks the critic's fade into the black.

March 2: A good cause doesn't always make for good songs; back on the wagon with the Grateful Dead; Kent Nagano provides an entry to the classical world; a return to Montreal, and to a love of popular music.

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